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The Impact of War on Modern Religious Trends in the U.S.

By George Gallup, Jr.

Preaching on the battlefield in Bataan in 1942, Father William Thomas Cummings said, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Among the people on the home front in the United States at that time, religious practice grew stronger. From the perspective of 50 years of Gallup Polls on religious practice during periods of war and peace, we find that war usually, but not always, draws people closer to prayer and to the church.

Concern about World War II caused increasing numbers of Americans, especially young adults, to turn to the Bible. In addition, the war appears to have generated a gradual upward trend in church attendance and in church membership in the U.S.

Church membership grew from 72% of the adult population in 1940 to 76% in 1947. Church attendance increased from 37% who attended in a typical week of 1940 to 39% in 1950 at the outset of the Korean War.

During the period of the Korean and Cold Wars, church attendance rose further to 49% in measurements taken in 1955 and 1958.

This upsurge in religious interest was followed by a downturn in church attendance, membership, and the importance people placed on religion in their lives. The Vietnam War and the protests it generated in the 1960s and early 1970s, if not a direct cause of this downtrend, appear to have accelerated it.

The Vietnam War, in contrast to earlier conflicts, may have had a negative effect on religion (at least in terms of religious practice and confidence in organized religion). In all fairness to religion, however, it should be remembered that there was a strong anti-establishment mood among young people during the period, beginning with opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam and culminating with the Watergate debacle. This mood led to a distrust of many key institutions in our society, including the church. Alternately, it also marked a period when many young people were actively experimenting with cults, counter-movements, eastern religions, and other non-traditional beliefs.

As a consequence, church membership was 73% in 1965 and 71% in 1975. Church attendance declined from 47% in 1960 to 40% in 1975. Those who said religion is important in their lives declined from 70% in 1965 to 52% in 1978. Those who gave no religious affiliation increased from 2% in 1962 to 5% in 1972. Frequency of prayer, as measured by those stating they pray twice a day or more, declined from 41% in 1965 to 27% in 1978.

Most damagingly, in terms of perceptions, those who said religion was increasing its influence on America fell from 38% in 1965 to 14% in 1970. Those who believe religion can answer the problems of society from 81% in 1957 to 62% in 1974.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam era, religion began gradually to recover lost ground, only to be rocked from within by the televangelist scandals. But even these did not seem to have had more than a temporary effect as early indications in the past two years have suggested the public might be turning to the church once again.

The church in particular once more was a leader among institutions inspiring confidence among the public. Remarkably, in recent years it has placed second to the U.S. military which, well before the Persian Gulf situation and conflict, has become first among most trusted institutions. The ubiquitous yellow ribbons on the Persian Gulf stand in stark contrast to the televised sights of flag burning during the Vietnam era.

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The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue were created in the U.S. in the early 20th century. The style is called "Empire."

Was It a Just War?

The Persian Gulf War and the events leading up to it provided a rare insight to the processes of public opinion formation as leaders and citizens alike agonized over decisions that could lead to war or to peace. Between the time Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990 and the air war began on January 16, 1991, the public witnessed intensive debate in the halls of Congress and the United Nations about sanctions, peaceful alternatives, and the possibility of war. Several commentators noted that President Bush and the coalition he led were particularly careful during this period to state that their objectives were moral and "just."

The events in Kuwait and the Persian Gulf area had a profound impact upon the public's attitude towards war, itself. For 20 years in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the American public was sharply divided in its views towards war, with an average of 47% believing it is an outmoded way of settling differences between nations, 45% saying it is sometimes necessary, and 8% undecided. As recently as March 1990, a similar halving of opinion was found, with 48% saying war is outmoded and 49% believing it to be sometimes necessary.

Less than one year later in early February 1991, in a dramatic change of opinion, eight Americans in 10 (80%) expressed the belief that war is sometimes necessary. Only 17% now believe it is an outmoded method, and 3% are undecided.

Additional questioning elicited information that the public may be highly selective in deciding which wars are "just" and which are not. Only one person in four (25%) now concludes that the Vietnam War was just. Only about half (49%) think the Korean police action was justified. By comparison, 89% feel World War II was a just cause, and high marks in this respect also are given to the War of Independence (75%) and World War I (76%). The Civil War, which many people had just relived through a highly acclaimed special PBS television series, now is considered just by 70% of the public.

The Persian Gulf War was judged to be just by 74% of the public. The conclusion would appear to be that the public for the past 20 years was not totally rejecting the concept of war as being sometimes justified, but instead may have been reflecting its disapproval of America's military involvement in Vietnam and Korea.

"Just" War Principles

Adherents of all faiths have struggled to reconcile religious principles with the brutal events of war since the beginnings of recorded history. Christians were not exceptional in this respect, and it was not until the 4th century that Augustine first promulgated the principle that war could be waged for a just cause. By the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas stated three additional elements that must be present for a just war, and later Catholic and Protestant theologians refined these principles and added others.

In the modern era there are now six widely recognized principles that must be met if a war is to be considered just by the devout, and Gallup surveyed the American public on their opinion of whether they felt these tenets applied to the Persian Gulf War. The result was that each of the six principles individually met approval from a majority of Americans, but collectively, only about half of those surveyed (49%) indicated approval of all six principles.

Nearly all of the respondents (95%) agreed that "there is a reasonable likelihood that the military action will succeed," including 76% who "strongly" agreed. Note that this finding stands in stark contrast to one of the most frequently stated objections to the Vietnam War from hawk and dove alike that there "was never a light at the end of the tunnel" in that conflict.

The high degree of unanimity among members of the United Nations in invoking sanctions against Iraq and by the majority of the members of Congress in endorsing President Bush's actions may have led to the opinion held by many that "The military action has been undertaken by responsible authorities; that is, by a recognized leader of a nation or leaders of a group of nations." Almost nine persons in 10 (87%) believed this condition had been met, including 61% who felt strongly so.

Similarly, the careful exploration of sanctions, patient review of diplomatic alternatives, extended deadlines, and use of an air war before the land invasion took place, may have led three Americans in four (76%) to believe that "the military action was taken as a 'last resort,' that is all attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully were exhausted." A majority (56%) strongly agreed that this had been done. Once the ground war began, 84% of the U.S. population in a February 24 Gallup Poll said they approved of the decision to begin that phase of the offensive, and 81% felt President Bush had given sufficient time for the Soviet and other diplomatic efforts to end the war to be given a chance before deciding to start the land campaign.

The precision bombing of the air war, which was so dramatically depicted by gun cameras, certainly may have led many to believe that the low number of civilian casualties in com-

parison to past wars was in keeping with the requirement that "the military action is likely to avoid harming civilians where possible." Strongly agreeing that this was the case were 43% of the respondents, while an additional 28% agreed somewhat.

On balance, nearly three Americans in four (72%) felt that in the Persian Gulf War "the good that will be achieved by the military action will clearly outweigh the harm that may be done." Four in 10 respondents (40%) agreed strongly.

Finally, examining their consciences, eight persons in 10 felt "there is a 'just' cause for taking the military action; that is, a moral reason." Agreeing strongly were a majority of 54%, while 26% believed somewhat strongly that this fundamental principle had been met. With the apparent backing of the American people, President Bush proclaimed victory to the U.S. Congress with the words, "We went half way around the world to do what is moral and just and right."

The findings are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,013 adults, 18 and older, conducted between February 7 to 10, 1991, shortly before the land campaign began in the Persian Gulf War. For samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Was The Persian Gulf War Just?

Here are six statements about the U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf War. Please tell me if you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree strongly with each statement.

	Agree strongly	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Disagree strongly
Reasonable likelihood the military action will succeed	76%	19%	2%	2%
Military action has been undertaken by responsible authorities	61	26	6	3
Military action was taken as a last resort -- all peace attempts were exhausted	56	21	9	11
There is a just, moral cause for taking military action	54	26	7	10
Military action is likely to avoid harming civilians where possible	43	28	13	13
The good achieved by military action will clearly outweigh the harm that may be done	40	32	10	13

"No opinion," 1% to 5%, omitted.

Is War Outmoded?

Some people feel that war is an outmoded way of settling differences between nations. Others feel that wars are sometimes necessary to settle differences. With which point of view do you agree?

	Outmoded	Sometimes necessary	No opinion
February 1991	17%	80%	3%
March 1990	48	49	3
1981	50	43	7
1975	45	46	9
1971	46	43	11

Opinion of "Just Wars"

As I read a list of the wars the United States has been involved in, please tell me, for each, whether you think it to be a "just" war, or not.

	"Just"	Not Just	No opinion
Revolutionary War	76%	9%	15%
Civil War	70	19	11
World War I	76	8	16
World War II	89	5	6
Korean War	49	32	19
Vietnam War	25	65	10
Persian Gulf War	74	21	5

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Attending Church and Voluntarism Important Civic Traits in Opinion of Teens

America's teen-agers often reject wealth and instead stress voluntarism and attendance of religious services as important civic virtues. Nine teens in 10 say that doing charitable or voluntary work in the community is a very important (51%) or somewhat important (41%) factor of being a good citizen. Previous Gallup surveys have consistently demonstrated strong linkage between religion and voluntarism, and so it is not surprising that attending religious services also is considered an important civic trait by three teens in four. Religious attendance is very important in the opinion of 36% and somewhat important by 37% of the teens. Rejecting the importance of religious attendance as a civic virtue are 18% of the teens who say it is of little importance and 8% who believe it is of no importance at all.

By comparison, the accumulation of a large sum of money is considered very important by only 26% of the teens, and somewhat important by 37%.

Teens living in the South (44%) and Midwest (40%) are more likely than those from the East (25%) or West (32%) to consider religious attendance to be very important.

Young women are more likely than young men to believe that charitable and voluntary efforts are very important, by a margin of 56% to 46%. Also attaching higher-than-average importance to voluntarism are non-white teens (58%), and those who live in the Midwest (57%).

The findings are based on telephone interviews with a national cross section of 500 teenagers, 13 through 17, conducted during the period of October 12-28, 1990 by the Gallup Youth Survey.

Very Important Civic Traits

How important do you think the following are for someone to be a good citizen of this country: very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important... Going to religious services regularly? Do charitable or voluntary work in the community ? Earn a lot of money?

	Voluntarism	Religious attendance
National	51%	36%
Male	46	37
Female	56	36
Ages 13-15	51	38
Ages 16-17	50	34
White	48	38
Non-white	58	30
Above-average students	54	39
Average and below	44	33
East	46	25
Midwest	57	40
South	50	44
West	50	32

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In the days just prior to the January 15 deadline imposed by the United Nations as debates and tensions mounted among the people of this country, a survey showed 57% of Americans saying they were praying more than usual. Little change was recorded in the level of church membership, in a survey conducted soon after military action was initiated, while the percentage attending church in a typical week remained at the highest level recorded in nearly three decades, continuing the modest upward trend that has been building over the past four years. Basically, these initial results suggest an upturn in private faith, but not in organizational commitment.

Surveys conducted during the first few days of the fighting showed higher percentages than usual saying that religion is "very important" in their lives — 62%. This compares with an average of 55% in the 1980s saying religion was very important to them. Belief in prayer was also strong, with 59% saying they thought their prayers in a situation like the Persian Gulf War were very effective.

The levels of basic religious belief have remained constant throughout war and peace in the past half century. It remains to be seen if the current uptrends in religious practice are the signal of long-term church renewal or are short-termed.

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